

THE GINGERBREAD CASTLE  
Wheatworth Road  
Hamburg  
Sussex County  
New Jersey

HALS NJ-4  
*NJ-4*

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### THE GINGERBREAD CASTLE

HALS NO. NJ-4

**Location:** Wheatsworth Road, Hamburg Borough, Sussex County, New Jersey  
Lat: 41.146247 Long: - 74.576053 (Center of the Gingerbread Castle, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).

**Significance:** The Gingerbread Castle, originally designed and called by Joseph Urban, the Fairy Tale House, Est. 1928 is a rare example of fantasy architecture of the late 1920's in Sussex County, New Jersey conceived by a the premier Broadway theater set designer and architect and programmed as a children's theme park in the "Land of Lakes" vacation area of northern New Jersey. This fairy tale inspired site was built on the abandoned Wheatsworth Mills property, circa 1808, originally owned the Nabisco Company.

**Description:** Joseph Urban's Fairy Tale House  
(excerpted from <http://www.thegingerbreadcastle.com/>)

Opened in early 1930's, The Gingerbread Castle is where dreams came to life, and Hansel and Gretel waited to take every child and grown –up through this exciting adventure.

The walls are made of ginger-bread (your imagination tells you so), the roof of frosted sugar. Candy cane towers and cake icing turrets, animal cracker handrails and a plum pudding grille were once a thrill at the Gingerbread Castle. Now defunct, this seminal fairy tale themed, children's amusement venue on 6.63 acres in Hamburg "the children's town" fueled the imagination of several generations of young fans of classic bedtime stories. Hamburg Borough used the theme in fanciful street signs and as the insignia for its local police force.

The Gingerbread Castle recaptured the spirit of childhood and provided all visitors, young and old, with a momentary glimpse back into an almost forgotten memories. Based on Grimm Brothers' collection of German Folk tales published in 1812, the Gingerbread Castle featured most of the character known to children regardless of nationality or color.

Visitors were led by Hansel and Gretel through the Gingerbread castle while they recited the fairy tales connected with each display. Some of the favorites were Humpty- Dumpty perched atop his famous wall, Prince Charming astride his prancing charger, the Spitting Black Cat standing guard over the castle up high up in the turret and the Wise Old Owl watching every move with unblinking yellow eyes.

The tour led past the strange abode of the Old Lady Who Lived In A Shoe, and down the dank stairs to the dungeon like cellar of the castle the Witch's Trophy Room then up a winding staircase to the Main Hall of the castle where Hansel and Gretel pointed out the gingerbread cookies studding the walls, the peppermint sticks, and the windows composed of multi-colored candles.

You were then directed to the little alcoves off the main hall which contained figures depicting heroines from various fairy tales. Miss Muffet's spider suspended from a single thread from his huge web high up in the turret of the castle.

An awesome pit covered with a plum pudding grille; an evil witch astride her broom ready to flee from reproachful eyes and the witch's evil kitchen where a big black cauldron contains the bones of the hapless children trapped in her lair and cooked alive!

Hansel and Gretel then lead you out through a narrow door into a landing high up in the battlements and down a brick stairway past animal cracker balustrades formed by elephants. A look on high you could see the black seal perched on a peppermint stick balancing a big orange ball on his nose.

The tours would lead you back over to the reception area where you could take a train ride on the grounds!

The Gingerbread Castle was truly a place where dreams came true.

History: F.H Bennett, inventor of Milk Bone Dog Biscuits and owner of Wheatsworth Mills, as a boy loved to sit on the floor at his mother's feet and listen with wide eyed wonder at the little fairy tales she related to him.

As the years passed, Bennett never forgot the fairy tales told to him and he hoped that someday ...somehow ...he could build land of make believe.....

In the 1920's, He attended a stage production of Humperdinck's famous opera, "Hansel and Gretel".

Inspired by the fabulous stage settings and designs, by Joseph Urban, the world renowned set designer, he conceived the idea of constructing a gingerbread castle in which figurines illustrating fairy tale characters would be displayed.

Bennett approached Urban and two years later The Gingerbread Castle was completed at a cost of \$50,000.00 and opened to the public on the grounds of the Wheatsworth Mills. One of the original flour mills of the Nabisco Company. Time Magazine interviewed Fred H. Bennett, Monday, July 14, 1930 and a link to that article is in the website cited in this application.

Sometime in the 1980's, the Gingerbread Castle fell into a serious state of disrepair. Eventually, the property was only used as a haunted house attraction during Halloween. But in the early 21st century, there was a renewed interest in the property. Frank Hinger bought the property and began a series of fundraisers to help fix it up. The restoration was boosted, in part, by Hampton Hotels, and its "Explore the Highway with Hampton Save A Landmark™" campaign selecting The Gingerbread Castle in Hamburg, New Jersey as its 21st landmark refurbishment project.

Today, the Gingerbread Castle is in the hands of Historic Hamburg, LLC, lost in foreclosure and sheriff's sale early 2007. A Principal of the company has stated the intention to restore the site as a children's museum, though there appears to be no actions in that directions to date. Hopes are now that it will not be destroyed and can be restored to its intended purpose.

The Gingerbread Castle is one of Joseph Urban's last projects completed before his passing. Columbia University in NYC, has a small collection of Mr. Urban's works, designs, buildings, and sketches at their facility.

Urban, Joseph (1872–1933), designer and architect. One of the greatest of all scenic artists, he was born in Vienna, where he later studied at the Art Academy under Baron Carl Hassauer and at the Polytechnicum. Urban first came to America to create the Austrian Pavilion for the 1904 St. Louis Fair. The Boston Opera Company brought him back in 1911 to design its sets, but it was his work on *The Garden of Paradise* (1914) that brought him to the attention of Florenz Ziegfeld and launched his Broadway career. Although he designed sets for James K. Hackett's Shakespearean revivals and other plays, it was his work on musicals for which he became famous. Urban created the sets for all the Ziegfeld Follies from 1915 to 1931, as well as such shows as *Sally* (1920), *Sunny* (1925), *Rio Rita* (1927) *Show Boat* (1927), *The Three Musketeers* (1928), *Whoopee* (1928), and *Music in the Air* (1932). He was the first major designer to carefully coordinate colors and to employ subtle lighting to enhance his color schemes. Typical of the work of "Unfailing Urban" was his opening set for *Rosalie* (1928), in which a brown arch framed a brown village rising to a bluish-brown sea. His (and Ziegfeld's) favorite color was blue, and he gained fame for what became known as "Urban blue." He also designed several theatres, most notably the egg-shaped, boxless Ziegfeld Theatre, with its magnificent murals and gilt stage. Away from the theatre he served as architect for numerous homes and buildings and also earned a reputation as an illustrator of children's books. Biography: Joseph Urban, Randolph Carter, Robert Reed Cole, 1992

Sources: <http://www.thegingerbreadcastle.com/>

<http://www.glasssteelandstone.com/BuildingDetail/633.php> © Artefaqs. All Rights Reserved.

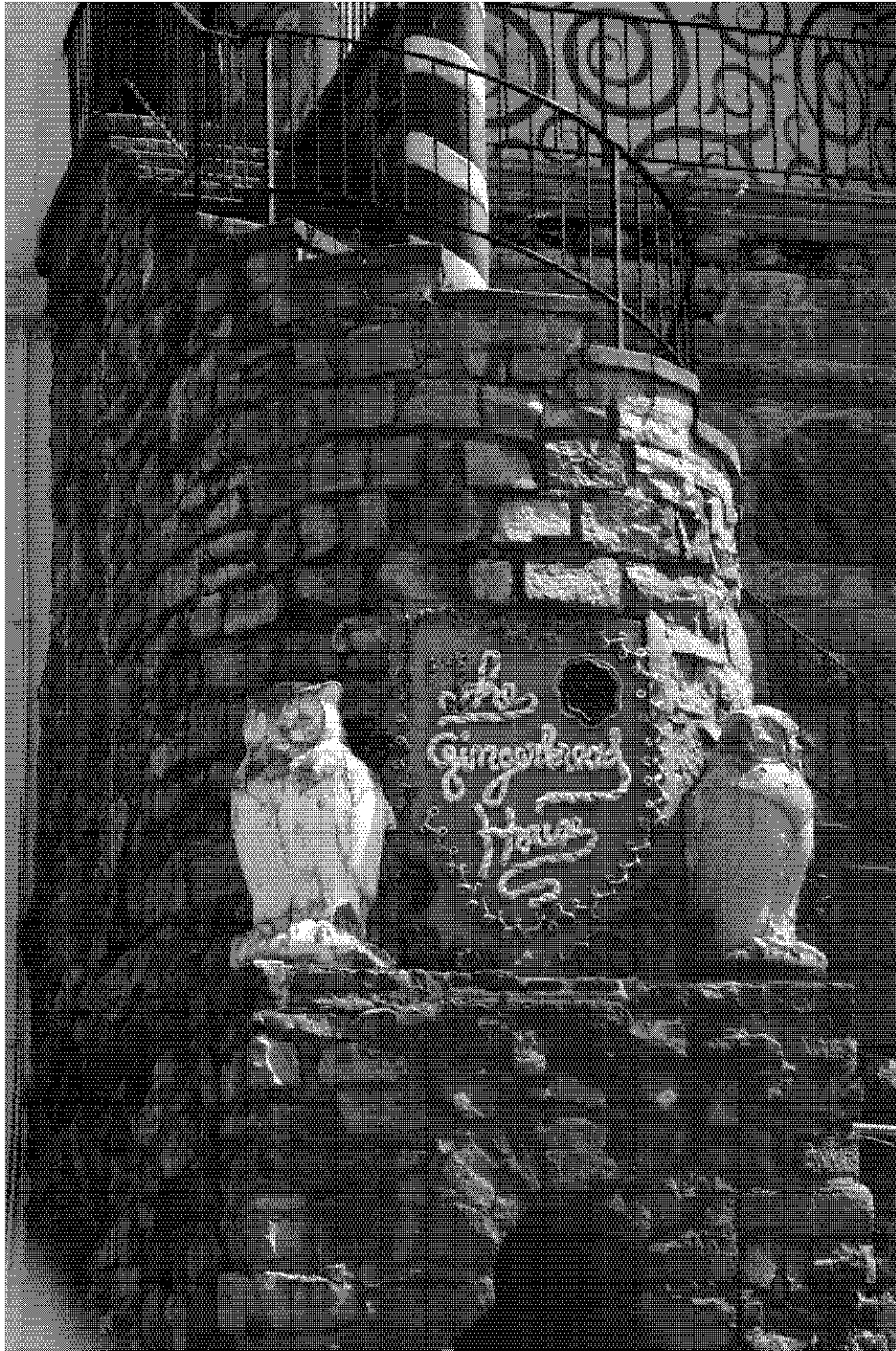
<http://www.crystalspringsbuilders.com/Content/Articles.asp?SID=1&CID=24&AID=109>

<http://postcards.amusementpics.com/Gingerbread%20Castle%20Postcards.htm>

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View of Gingerbread Castle front façade, note iron Black Cat on roof and gingerbread ornamentation (Nick Tufaro, April 2010).



Detail view of Gingerbread Castle signage at entrance (Nick Tufaro, April 2010).



View of Humpty Dumpty statue sitting atop a stone retaining wall, note concrete construction (Nick Tufaro, April 2010).